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**What the Bible Means—and Could Mean—in English Political Discourse**

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As with the category 'religion', terms such as 'secular' and 'post-secular' are difficult to pin down, at least in the sense of describing historical or cultural phenomena. In analysing mainstream English political discourse, they are particularly difficult to define because a cluster of terms and ideas relating to 'religion' (e.g. Bible, Christianity) have been consistently present whilst politicians (certainly post-Thatcher) have been cautious and typically vague, with avoidance of anything that might be deemed 'fundamentalist' (sometimes phrased as 'literal'), illiberal or weird. There is, indeed, some evidence that a politician using the Bible explicitly is emphatically not what certain voters want (cf. Field 2014: 517), particularly outside areas where religious affiliation has been in long-term decline. Yet the same evidence also shows that there is no widespread dislike of the Bible in England and even a tendency to see it (or Christianity or religion) as a useful moral guide (cf. Day 2011: 132-33, 136-37, 156-62; Storm 2013: 27; Engelke 2013; Crossley 2018: 99-131). Moreover, while church attendance and religious self-identification have been in decades-long decline in England and there has been a more recent rise in those identifying with 'no religion', such phenomena do not equate with widespread hard atheism, as a range of beliefs in things 'supernatural' (e.g., guardian angels, spirits, soul etc.) and acts typically classified as 'religious' (e.g., prayer) are present among people who may no longer attend church or identify as religious (for discussion see e.g., Brown 2003, 2006, 2009; Parsons 2004; Voas and Crockett 2005; McLeod 2007; Day 2011; Davie 2015; Bullivant 2017). To complicate matters further, Ingrid Storm (2011, 2013; cf. Day 2011: 50-56, 137-38, 179-88, 194-96), with reference to the British Social Attitudes data from 2008, has shown that just over 23% made a connection between 'British' and 'Christian', particularly as a kind of ethnic marker. Yet, such connections seem less likely among regular churchgoers and, Storm argued, those who were not regular churchgoers were more likely to view immigration as a threat to national identity.

Whatever problematic term we use to classify all this ('secular', 'post-secular', 'implicit religion', 'nominal Christianity'), it is clear that a mainstream politician has to navigate, or stay suitably aloof from, such cultural complexity. In this article, I want to look at some of the dominant ways the Bible and Christianity are constructed in contemporary mainstream English political discourse in this general context.[1] To summarise previous research, the Bible has long functioned as a form of authority in mainstream English political discourse but its assumed meaning has changed over the past forty years (Crossley 2016). Margaret Thatcher used the Bible to justify the then emerging economic liberalism (or neoliberalism), English or British values, charitable giving over the welfare state, and an individualism that was deemed incompatible with the Soviet Communism, Marxism and socialism (e.g., Thatcher 1978; Thatcher 1981; Thatcher 1988; Thatcher and Walden 1980). Thatcher provided the template for mainstream politicians until the emergence of Corbyn, though there were changes made. It is clear, for instance, that no politician has been as explicit as Thatcher in using the Bible, no doubt reflecting the broader changes in religious affiliation in the UK. Other changes were more qualifications. Tony Blair and New Labour nuanced Thatcher in different ways but most influential has been the stress that the Bible supports social liberalism (especially equality

[1] The focus on 'English' political discourse is a deliberate choice because the Bible means something different in (for instance) Glasgow or Northern Ireland than it does in English-based politics.

of gender and sexuality). Blair also helped push the older socialist understandings of the Bible associated with Tony Benn and the Labour Left to the fringes of parliamentary debate by transforming the language of the Left to support economic deregulation and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (e.g., Blair 2001a, 2001b, Hari 2009). By the time David Cameron was Prime Minister, the Thatcher-Blair template for understanding the Bible was accepted, nuanced and intensified. Same-sex marriage was legalised (and supported with reference to Jesus in parliamentary debates), the Good Samarian used to justify military intervention on the grounds of not 'walking by', and Jesus became the authority for outsourcing the role of the state in the flagship Big Society agenda (e.g., Cameron 2010, 2014a, 2014b, 2015).

Cameronism and the intensification of Thatcher and Blair's Bible represents one reaction to the 2008 financial crash. Other reactions would play their role (e.g., Corbynism) and even overthrow Cameron himself (e.g., Brexit), and they have all played an important role in reconstructing understanding of the Bible in contemporary English political discourse. There is not, at the time of writing, a dominant replacement for what was broadly accepted by Thatcher, Blair, and Cameron and we are in a situation where the meaning of the Bible in mainstream English political discourse is in flux. To gain an understanding of future constructions, it is necessary to understand some (and only some) of the competing views on the meaning of the Bible in the present. This will mean looking at the main political leaders in English political discourse around the time of the 2017 General Election before moving on to the possible futures for understanding the Bible.

**The Return of Socialism to the Bible and Politics**

As austerity became increasingly entrenched, reactions from the Left were slowly gathering momentum and, with the dramatic emergence of Corbyn and Corbynism, would be accompanied by overtly socialist understandings of Christianity and the Bible. By the time Corbyn had been elected leader of the Labour Party, his close parliamentary ally Cat Smith was openly claiming that 'Jesus was a radical socialist' and, as one of her examples, she used the image popular during Occupy: Jesus 'turning over the tables in the temple' (Bennett 2015). As party leader, Corbyn himself began referencing or discussing the Bible and Christianity, including restoring to public debate the old socialist favourite passage, Acts 4.32-35 (Corbyn 2015). Where Cameron in his festive messages rhetorically stressed that foodbanks were a positive example of outsourcing the state, Corbyn pressed for greater state support in areas of housing and rough sleeping. All this was grounded in the Bible and encapsulated by the Christmas story. Corbyn's reference to 'love for your neighbour' in this context is significant because it occurs in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37; cf. Leviticus 19.18; Mark 12.28-34; Matthew 22.34-40; Galatians 5.14). When Corbyn has alluded to the Bible it has almost always been to the Good Samaritan and the working out of 'love for your neighbour' through the notion of not passing by on the other side, typically to defend welfare provision or social housing for the vulnerable (Crossley 2015: 72-73; Crossley, 2016: 315-17). In addition to implicitly critiquing much of the Labour Party just prior to his victory, there has been an anti-Thatcherite emphasis in this allusion as it runs contrary to Thatcher's famous claim that 'no-one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well' (Thatcher and Walden 1980).

In this respect, it is important to highlight that Corbyn has invoked 'our values' or 'British values' in relation to political constructions of Christianity and the Bible. There are precise reasons behind the invocation of this tradition of English or British socialism. It was notable, for instance, that this tradition was employed by Corbyn amidst claims that he lacked patriotism because he silently

reflected on the generation of his parents rather than singing the national anthem at a Battle of Britain memorial service, because his tie was too loose, and because he had not bowed to a sufficient degree at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday. Corbyn, like his mentor Tony Benn, can also be located in a tradition of invoking the Bible and radical Christianity as something distinctive to the *English* or *British* Left which has historically been used to present an English (or British) socialism uncontaminated by continental variants deemed problematic (Crossley 2016: 24-26, 312-15). Related to this, it is telling that a version of the tradition has been utilised in light of the electoral threat from UKIP. For instance, Sam Tarry, co-director of Corbyn's re-election campaign, explicitly sought to counter the threat from UKIP with reference to the 'freedoms' fought for by 'the Peasants' Revolt, the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the Chartists, and the suffragettes and others' as part of the 'radical tradition' to emphasise 'an English Labour Party' with a 'socialist vision' which is a 'patriotic one, because nothing is more patriotic than building a society for the many; not the few' (Asthana 2017).

**May's Ethnonationalist Bible**

As this already suggests, if Corbynite socialism represents a post-crash revolt on the Left, there was another development happening which became (not entirely fairly) associated with the Right, and UKIP particularly: Brexit. Brexit, especially in relation to 'immigration' issues, would mark another shift which would nuance how religion would become understood and constructed in English political discourse. After the Coalition gained power, UKIP began to rise significantly in the polls (even polling ahead of the Liberal Democrats) with Nigel Farage becoming an ever-more prominent figure. This has almost certainly contributed to the development of nativist or ethnocentric constructions of the Bible common enough on the far right and among UKIP members. But Brexit in this form has had a significant impact on Theresa May's understanding of the Bible and Christianity, and not just the far right of the Conservatives. Her construction of Christmas has been telling in this regard, as the following exchange in the House of Commons shows:

> **Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con)**: The Prime Minister will be aware of coverage regarding a report to be published by Dame Louise Casey, the Government's integration tsar. The report will speak of British laws, culture, values and traditions, such as Christmas, being threatened by political correctness from council officials. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to send a loud and clear message that the best way to secure a harmonious society is not only for mainstream Britain to respect minority traditions, such as Diwali, Vaisakhi and Eid, but for council officials to appreciate that minority communities should respect the views and traditions of mainstream Britain, which means that Christmas is not 'Winterval' and that Christmas trees are not 'festive' trees?
>
> **Prime Minister, Theresa May**: I agree with my hon. Friend. I will not comment on or pre-empt the findings of Louise Casey's review, which is an important piece of work. I will simply join my hon. Friend by saying that what we want to see in our society is tolerance and understanding. We want minority communities to be able to recognise and stand up for their traditions, but we also want to be able to stand up for our traditions generally, and that includes Christmas. (Hansard 2016a)

One notable aspect of this exchange is that it played into discourses about 'political correctness', ownership of language, and, of course, the alleged threats to Christmas itself. Indeed, she elsewhere invoked Christmas as an assumed aspect of normative culture once again seemingly under threat (Hansard 2016b). All this has been a favoured (and typically inaccurate) discourse of the Right for

some time now. While also tapping into a common tradition embraced by all leading politicians, namely that Christianity, the Bible, and Christmas (or Easter) are a part of English or British cultural heritage, the spin on it was clearly one that might broadly be associated with the Conservative Right, right-wing tabloids, or, indeed, UKIP.

May's comments can be seen to be more obviously coloured by Brexit when we compare her words with Cameron's. While there are certain general overlaps between Cameron's Christmas and May's Christmas, the following comments by May represent a distinct shift: 'We want minority communities to be able to recognise and stand up for their traditions, but we also want to be able to stand up for our traditions generally, and that includes Christmas'. A year earlier, Cameron (2015) certainly made nostalgic claims about Britain being a 'Christian country' and the related values represented by Jesus' birth ('peace, mercy, goodwill and, above all, hope') but it is because of these 'important religious roots and Christian values' that 'Britain has been such a successful home to people of all faiths and none.' The phrase 'all faiths and none' (or variants) seems to have been a favourite for Cameron as his particular way of explaining that the Bible and Christianity were also the source of a kind of multicultural British or English nationhood (e.g. Cameron 2010, 2014a).

This rhetoric is obviously a paternalistic and nationalist move in its own way, but May's shifts more towards a soft ethnonationalism. In fact, we might say that Cameron's myth of British and Christian superiority is more obviously part of the pre-Trump, pre-Brexit liberal embrace of others without inclusion or at least mention of, as Slavoj Žižek (1997), might put it, any problematic, illiberal Otherness typical of neoliberal multicultural discourse. But, in a new world of Brexit and Trump, May's rhetoric, following the lead of Shailesh Vara, was blunt in its identifying the Other and its difference, seemingly left open without explicit judgment. Note in May's response the strong distinction between minorities ('their traditions') and the assumption of a normative British identity which, if it is not exactly 'white', then 'our traditions' (particularly Christmas) are emphatically not Diwali, Vaisakhi or Eid. The Brexit-inspired Othering of those deemed Asian minorities ought to be clear enough, even if it is not as negative as some of the rhetoric coming from UKIP. Perhaps this toying with an ethnonationalist construction of Christmas is unsurprising in light of her early premiership of a red, white and blue Brexit, a desire to deal with the threat of UKIP, an influential cohort of Leave MPs on the backbenches, and, most tellingly, the Conservative government floating the idea of companies identifying non-British workers.

By Easter 2017, the Conservatives were taking over UKIP's anti-EU rhetoric from the Right while simultaneously not wanting to isolate pro-EU (and potentially Conservative) voters entirely. It was in the rhetorical context of Brexit that May (2017a) made the following comments:

> This Easter I think of those values that we share – values that I learnt in my own childhood, growing up in a vicarage. Values of compassion, community, citizenship. The sense of obligation we have to one another. These are values we all hold in common, and values that are visibly lived out every day by Christians, as well as by people of other faiths or none.

We do not have quite the stark contrast of 'their traditions' and 'our traditions' but the sentiment is similar: it is not '*all* faiths and none' of Cameron but '*other* faiths and none' which still marks a sharper difference. It is also worth observing the context of May's Easter because just prior to this speech May became involved in a minor controversy about whether the National Trust and Cadbury should have included 'Easter' in their logo after jointly sponsoring an egg hunt, despite the various mentions on their website. She thought it was 'absolutely ridiculous' that they did not and that Easter is a 'very important festival for the Christian faith', citing that she was both a vicar's daughter and a member of the National Trust (both potential signifiers of a certain patriotic stereotype) in

support (ITV 2017; Elgot and Sherwood 2017). Nevertheless, we might speculate that the nod to 'people of other faiths or none' reveals some of the other ideological pulls on May. It is not likely that she would have been rhetorically *too* divisive in an official government message for a religious festival and with a General Election then imminent. Moreover, by Christmas 2017, May brought back Cameron's rhetoric when she spoke about vague values being 'lived out every day in our country by people all faiths and none' and mentioned coming together 'this Christmas … confident and united in the values we share', 'whatever our faith' (May 2017b). The nativist rhetoric could presumably only go so far electorally speaking.

The Election, of course, turned out to be something of a failure for May for numerous reasons but it now looks like we have witnessed the return to two party politics with May and Corbyn representing two major constructions of the Bible and Christianity as sources of authority for their distinctive political positions. But there is another major understanding of the Bible which cut across all parties and has not gone away: the Bible as necessarily supportive of a certain kind of social liberalism.

**Tim Farron, Social Liberalism and the Bible**

The Liberal Democrats did not make a serious impact on the Election but Tim Farron functions as an example of the socially liberal constraints on contemporary political discourse. As his 2016 Christmas address showed, Farron was, for a post-Thatcher politician, unusually forthright in his Christian beliefs, though as leader he did not ultimately stray too far from vague and palatable constructions of Christianity and the Bible (e.g., Farron 2016). There are good reasons why Farron wanted to keep certain controls on where he would open his Bible: he had to deal with questions about whether he thought homosexuality—or, more precisely, homoerotic sex—is a sin. It is possible that he did think it a sin during his time as leader, but this is not the sort of thing a political leader of a party could then readily admit (UKIP aside, perhaps). Farron therefore made the classic liberal distinction between his personal (Christian) morality and his public political liberalism which tolerates other groups and individuals, irrespective of whether they are personally agreeable. This, for Farron, was crucial to him being both a Christian and a L/liberal. In addition to claiming that we are all sinners, to get around the problem of potential media condemnation, Farron's approach, in a particularly awkward *Channel 4 News* interview on this topic shortly after becoming leader, was typical enough for mainstream political discourse and a move made by both Blair and Obama: he stressed a more 'liberal' part of the Bible over an 'illiberal' part. When confronted by the interviewer with the problematic Leviticus 18.22, Farron's solution was to point to Jesus instead and to favour a biblical passage more amenable to contemporary liberalism, Matthew 7.3 (Farron's paraphrase): 'You don't pick out the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye when there is a plank in your own' (Brooks-Pollock 2015). But whereas Blair and Obama would be doing this to deflect 'illiberal' parts of the Bible they do not want to condemn (e.g., slavery, concubines), Farron had to deflect from something far more problematic: something 'illiberal' he was suspected to endorse.

The presence of liberal constraints on Farron's public presentation of Christianity was effectively confirmed by politicians I have interviewed, and notably ones from different perspectives. One MP from a different party told me that Farron handled the situation well while another wished Farron could have been more explicit in his views but claimed that the problems of keeping his party onside and 'secularism' (presumably constructed as pro-homoerotic sex and religion constructed as anti-homoerotic sex) made it difficult for him. By way of contrast, a senior politician (also from a different party) and former frontbencher thought that Farron should simply oppose homophobia and support homoerotic sex or else he must be deemed an irrelevance to political debate. There is likely to be an

allusion to this sort of thinking when it was reported from the 2015 Labour Party conference that Angela Eagle criticised Tim Farron for deviating too far from the assumed liberal norm for being 'an evangelical Christian who believes in the literal truth of the bible' at a time of 'a huge revival of fundamentalist religious belief' but he 'just doesn't want to talk about it a lot because he knows how much it will embarrass his own party' (Hattenstone 2015). In each of these diverse cases, there is the assumption that being open in opposition to homoerotic sex was not an option for a leader of one of the main parties. Despite such pressures, Farron's dealing with this issue early in his leadership by effectively refusing to comment on the problematic biblical verses seems to have worked for him initially in that the issue did not become a serious problem for the party until the 2017 General Election. Here, the pressure on Farron to come clean about his compatibility with a more acceptable liberalism presumably weighed heavy as he first said that being in a gay relationship is not a sin and then (facing up to the theological technicality directly) that homoerotic sex is not a sin (Gledhill 2017).

In his Christmas messages, Farron tried to focus his biblical references on issues of immigration and Britishness but he remained an issue for the national press and political discourse for his views on homoerotic sex which in turn revealed a dominant ideological trend still at play in English political discourse for all politicians. Brian Paddick quit as shadow home secretary 'over concerns about the leader's views on various issues that were highlighted during GE17', and was soon to be followed by Farron himself (BBC 2017a). Farron's explanation was striking. He talked about being 'torn between living as a faithful Christian and serving as a political leader' and that a 'better, wiser person' perhaps could have dealt with this tension better, remaining 'faithful to Christ while leading a political party in the current environment.' Nevertheless, he concluded, that to be a leader of 'a progressive liberal party in 2017' and 'a committed Christian' who wanted 'to hold faithful to the Bible's teaching' was 'impossible' (BBC 2017b). It is notable that Farron (2017) published similar sentiments on the right-leaning *Spectator* blog, one of the venues where such (apparent) views would get a more sympathetic hearing in mainstream English political discourse. Following increasing public acceptance of homosexuality, the example of Farron shows how deeply embedded the socially liberal qualification to the Bible has now become in English political discourse, not least after same-sex marriage became legal under the Coalition and was defended in Parliament with reference to Jesus. While in June 2017 Corbyn and May represented two competing understandings of the Bible and Christianity in mainstream English political discourse, this form of liberalism should be seen as a third dominant construction with Farron functioning as a negative foil for its perpetuation.

**What the Bible Could Soon Mean**

It is not wise to predict the future at the best of times but just how wrong and surprised political pundits were between 2015 and 2017 ought to provide all the necessary warnings about anyone preaching predictive certainties. Indeed, just one year before the 2017 General Election, Cameronism (and thus accompanying constructions of the Bible) seemed to be in a fairly strong and stable position with Corbynism (and thus accompanying constructions of the Bible) doomed to electoral oblivion. It is perhaps the wisest course, then, to point out from where some of the potential for new changes and shifts in understandings of the Bible, religion and related terms might come, with the qualification that there are still plenty of unknowns. The fall of Tim Farron, which was related to his stance on the Bible, homosexuality, and sex, and its unpopularity (perceived or otherwise) with liberal voters, shows the ongoing strength of socially liberal constructions of, or constraints on, the Bible. With Vince Cable as leader (with accompanying emphases on him not having a problem with homosexuality) and with British social attitudes continuing in such a socially

liberal direction over the long term, the potential for the Liberal Democrats to allude to socially liberal understandings of the Bible is clear enough. Whether they push a strong construction of the Bible in relation to welcoming outsiders is certainly possible and perhaps likely but the apparent lack of a Remain surge or the fragmentation of Remain voters may result in a reassessment of where to place the emphasis.

Nevertheless, Brexit is still intertwined in political constructions of the Bible and perhaps nowhere clearer than with the Conservatives. May's hold on the Conservative leadership may be weak but, should she fall any time soon, there are still Brexit politicians with leadership potential (e.g., David Davis, Boris Johnson) who could maintain May's ethnonationalist line on Britain as Christian country, though Johnson is flexible enough to shift political direction if need be. A once leading contender from the Remain camp (though with a slim majority in her constituency), Amber Rudd, was still prepared to front the Brexit-inspired proposal that companies should identify non-British workers and could take a similar line to May (BBC 2016). Of course, the next Conservative leader might not be someone with frontbench experience. If we entertain the possibility of more shocks, Jacob Rees-Mogg—the anachronistically aristocratic social media star, Catholic, and Brexiteer—has been a promoter of religion in politics in a way which, in one sense, is at odds with the mainstream of political debate in the past decade. In an interview on *Good Morning Britain* (6 September 2017), Rees-Mogg was challenged on his Catholic beliefs, same-sex marriage, and abortion, in much the same way as Farron was. Indeed, Rees-Mogg defended himself in a similar way on same-sex marriage. Referring to a different New Testament passage from that of Farron but imbued with the same logic, he turned to the story of the 'woman taken in adultery' (John 7.53-8.11), and the example of Christ who said, 'he who is without sin cast the first stone' (Rees-Mogg's paraphrase), adding 'it is not for me to cast stones'. In other words, as an individual Catholic, he saw the 'teaching of the Catholic church', particularly 'in matters of faith and morals' as 'authoritative' but simultaneously would not judge those who live different lives. Moreover, as same-sex marriage was the law of the land such rights were protected irrespective of his personal views. Rees-Mogg was much blunter than Farron in admitting his views and it was striking how Rees-Mogg pushed their shared logic to criticise the Liberal Democrats for *not* tolerating a 'Christian as their leader' while the Conservatives would do so, and with notable assumptions about what 'Christian' must entail (Anonymous 2017).

Whether Rees-Mogg's bluntness will work in electoral terms where Farron's obfuscation failed will depend on a variety of factors, including whether enough potential Conservative voters do not find his social and religious 'conservatism' sufficiently off-putting. We should probably also factor in a key dimension of Rees-Mogg's persona that could assist his constructions of the Bible: his use of irony, as well as the ironic reception of Rees-Mogg. Despite his own worries about the future of politicians who openly identify as Christian, he is reported to have said:

> I think it's highly unlikely that God is particularly interested in the minutiae of party politics but if he were, everyone knows that God is a Somerset Conservative…Joseph of Arimathia [*sic*] is well known to have brought Christ to visit Glastonbury when Christ was a schoolboy – that would indicate a Somerset connection and all sensible people in Somerset are Conservatives so we get him as a Somerset Tory. (Dominiczak 2013)

Whether the relative popularity of Rees-Mogg amounts to anything remains to be seen but if he does rise further, or another comparable figure emergences, such irony (coupled with the increasing power of social media) has the potential to perpetuate ideas whilst simultaneously deflecting any problematic oddities or controversies in the construction of the Bible in much the same way as Boris Johnson has functioned throughout his career. Put another way, it would be the perpetuation of

ideology without appearing too ideologically committed. Should May fall soon there is no guarantee that her construction of the Bible and Christianity will be significantly changed but the potential for reconfiguring 'tolerance' to include the coexistence of 'illiberal' and 'liberal' notions is clearly present. And given the current 'culture wars' over issues of gender and sexuality, so-called 'identity politics', and heated debates about tolerating fascists, there may even be some support for a Rees-Moggian position.

Nevertheless, Conservatives close to Cameron and his liberal rhetoric are not without their ongoing influence on such matters. Perhaps the most striking example has been George Osbourne who, since taking over as editor at the *Evening Standard*, has been overseeing repeated criticism of May. The influence of Scotland also has potential influence here, particularly in the Conservative recovery led by the popular (at the time of writing) Ruth Davidson. Shortly after the result of 2017 General Election, she pointedly tweeted, 'As a Protestant Unionist about to marry an Irish Catholic, here's the Amnesty Pride lecture I gave in Belfast…' (@RuthDavidsonMSP, 9 June 2017). No doubt this reflected wider concerns among liberal Conservatives (north and south of the border) about working closely with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) after the result of a hung Parliament, particularly over how the DUP were to be understood in relation to religion and the Bible because this is a party from Northern Ireland with some MPs and activists open about their socially conservative Protestantism. This is not the sort of thing conventionally found in mainstream English political discourse and Northern Ireland has typically been categorised as a quite different context.

In terms of English political discourse, particularly in the more liberal press, there was a tendency to see the DUP on the Bible as potentially excessive for our times. To take a not untypical example, Zoe Williams (2017) remarked that 'someone read their manifesto and said it was basically the Bible with fortnightly bin collection'. On the issues of gender and sexuality, the *Mirror* (Blanchard 2017) went with the front-page headline of 'Coalition of Crackpots', referring to 'the fundamentalist DUP' and contrasting them with liberal, pro-LGBT+ rights Conservatives. Williams' article was likewise about homophobia and, given what we have seen with Farron, it should not be a surprise that this was a flashpoint, nor their views on LGBT+ issues generally and abortion. Other precise areas of excess that caused concern for sections of the press involved attitudes among DUP members on evolution and creationism. Lucy Pasha-Robinson (2017) discussed a DUP assembly member attending an event presenting '"the biblical case for the sound teaching of children" that will "offer helpful practical advice on how to counter evolutionary teaching."' Other reports focused on DUP connections with the Caleb Foundation, a creationist lobby group. Chris York (2017), for instance, reported that members and activists who believe that the Earth 'is less than 10,000 years old despite the fact that it is most certainly not' and thus they 'subscribe to the literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis, that the planet was created by God in six days'. The idea of following a 'literal interpretation' is the kind of qualification used to denote a deviant position problematic for, or alien to, the present liberal assumptions of English political discourse when cast in terms of the Bible, and York was not the only example of this emphasis (e.g., O'Doherty 2017).

That this sort of 'literal' or 'fundamentalist' understanding was deemed as unsuitable for English political discourse can be seen in terms of constructing it as *foreign*, in particular *American*, perhaps no surprise given the recurring issues of evolution, abortion, and creationism. Michael Hugh Walker (2017) not only referred to the foreign country of the past when he called the DUP 'our favourite intrepid adventures from the year 1644' but also referred to them as the 'Bible Belt bad boys of Ulster'. Like other areas of the press, the *Economist* provided an explanation about who the DUP are. While it was keen to note the balance between 'pious voters' and 'secular ones', it still referred to this as 'a mixture of old-time religion and secular nativism'. Indeed, the *Economist* referred to the

argument that the DUP were 'a "theocon" grouping whose ideas are unusual in today's western Europe' who would be 'much more familiar' to 'an American, especially from the deep South' and whose 'version of climate-change scepticism…echoes voices on America's religious right' (Erasmus 2017). We might push this analogy a little further. As it happens, the vagueness of (pre-Trump) liberal-democratic uses of religion and the Bible among American presidents of recent decades (e.g., Clinton, Bush, Obama) has much in common with mainstream English political discourse. But where they differ sharply is the electoral divisiveness of issues like abortion, evolution, creationism, and even LGBT+ rights which do not currently have traction in English political discourse. Quite whether any of the fears about DUP religious excess will come to prominence in English political discourse or will be managed out of public sight is for future historians. At present, foregrounding issues such as evolution or abortion are likely to be as popular as fox hunting but the potentiality for the DUP to bring about shifts in understanding the Bible and related terms (whether in support, opposition, or puzzlement) ought to be clear.

Quite what happens to Labour's understandings of the Bible will depend on the durability of the legacy of the transformation under Corbyn. Certainly, he has inaugurated the return of openly socialist understandings of the Bible but there are still potential challenges, not least the divisiveness of Brexit, freedom of movement, migration, and exploitation of labour among MPs, members and Labour supporters. While there has been a shift in the rhetoric of Labour MPs who previously did not support Corbyn, Blair continues to have some media support and we cannot discount the possibility of ongoing and accompanying neoliberal constructions of the Bible and religion of the sort associated with the Tony Blair Faith Foundation (Crossley 2016: 217-39). Other factions within Labour have also been hovering in the background of Corbyn, such as the interests in mutualism and social conservatism and critiques of immigration and neoliberalism associated with Blue Labour. Nevertheless, after the 2017 General Election, Corbyn was undoubtedly in his strongest position in terms of influencing the future of the Labour Party. What was crucial, and presumably will continue to be, was the rhetorical interest in younger voters and the role of the Corbynite group, Momentum. Like Momentum, or because of Momentum, social media has been both integral to developing such constructions due to a degree of freedom from the party bureaucracy. Here, some of the creative and widely disseminated use of memes and videos have connected a range of leftist perspectives and include recurring images of Corbyn and Corbyn allies in terms of radicalism and tapping in to the long tradition of Jesus-the-Radical but with crucial ironic distance which has allowed a range of leftist ideas outside Parliament to flourish in such leftist subcultures. If this continues, and the traditional news press continues its decline, we may see social media as central to future constructions of religion in English political discourse, and indeed beyond. But, unlike America, and despite some grudging admiration from the Conservatives, this is currently a stronghold of the Left.

But what Corbyn has also shown is how the Bible and Christianity can be used with a degree of success in public discourse. Corbyn and Corbynism do not have the problem of homosexuality and homoerotic sex about which to worry as it will be largely assumed to be supportive of social liberalism. Nor will publicly problematic claims about the biblical origins of the British state likely be a worry for the Corbyn circle. What Corbyn has revealed is one, possibly two ways, of (gently) using the Bible in public discourse, namely his vague use of the Good Samaritan and linking in the Bible and radical Christianity with notions of Englishness. As the studies on the shifts in English Christianity mentioned above do not reveal a widespread hatred of Christianity and suggest that there is support for the Bible and Christianity as a general moral code for helping others, then we should see Corbyn's constant allusions to the Good Samaritan as something that is palatable for much of the British public: pithy, vague, but with the rhetoric of basic human decency. It is further notable that on this issue (contrasted with practically every other issue) Corbyn has had a degree of protection

from the media who were always less likely to attack Christianity in a sustained manner (Crossley 2018: 25-26).

The second possible way that Corbynism may have tapped into another way of utilising the Bible and Christianity is looking to the English radical tradition noted above. It is difficult to get firm data but the Corbynite use of a vague Bible tied in with building a cohesive social movement in the face of the threat of UKIP might have some appeal. As we saw, there is a significant minority who identity Christianity with some kind of marker of national identity which has recently been a problem for the Left. While May has had some problems with pushing a more ethnonationalist line (the Conservatives still need more liberally minded voters in a way UKIP do not), the Corbynite route or one of a kind of civic nationalism might yet be one that works. Indeed, it is notable that some conservative critics (e.g., Peter Hitchens, Peter Oborne) have warmed to Corbyn on similar issues. These uses might not herald a dramatic revival of the Bible and Christianity in English political discourse but they do show the kinds of ways they might be successfully used in the current social and historical climate where they are otherwise largely frowned upon.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Much more could be said on all the politicians cited here. Nevertheless, it should be clear that running throughout these dominant and sometimes contradictory tendencies of understanding the Bible and Christianity (socialist, ethnonationalist, socially liberal) there is an implicit acknowledgement of the complexities of the long-term changes in religious affiliation in the UK. Corbyn has, like almost all mainstream politicians since Thatcher, kept his biblical rhetoric vague and likely supportive of the idea of the Bible as a source of morality and decency, hence his favoured reference to not 'passing by'. May has focused justifying her controversial ideas about nativism on broadly acceptable festivals of Christmas and Easter where it is safe for a politician to talk about the Bible and Christianity without too much controversy about being 'too religious', too strange, or too illiberal. Cutting across both is a social liberalism which has been the among the most durable features of understanding what the Bible should mean. But at the fringes of the mainstream, there have been implicit challenges to such social liberalism (e.g. the Conservative-DUP deal) or being explicit about personal morality which might be at odds with dominant social liberalism (e.g. Rees-Mogg). One option not covered but which should be acknowledged is that we might be in the dying days of the use of the Bible in English political discourse given the long-term decline in religious affiliation. If it does survive then it will no doubt be tied in with dominant ideological tendencies of the day. And yet we do not yet know the settled, long-term successor to Thatcherite neoliberalism. We may still be in the midst of the chaos before the new settlement emerges. Or we might be at the beginning of a state of semi-permanent chaos and contradiction. Or we might be in for an intensified version of what came before. Or perhaps there is an impending catastrophe which will then open up a reordering of the world; as Slavoj Žižek put it, 'the light at the end of the tunnel is probably the headlight of another train approaching us from the opposite direction' (Žižek 2017: xi-xii).

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